

Romance Scam Research Center

SOCIAL TECHNOLOGY AND SAFETY FOUNDATION

LIVING EVIDENCE SYNTHESIS

Reporting and Help-Seeking

Reporting and Help-Seeking in Romance and Relationship-Based Online Fraud

Across the reviewed evidence, underreporting of romance-type online fraud is substantial: official statistics and administrative counts underestimate victimisation because they rely on people who recognise abuse and choose to report. Only 9.4% of questionnaire respondents reported cases to police while 32.1% kept the case to themselves, and some complainants file proxy reports (romance scams had 7.6% proxy-filed complaints). Emotional and social barriers—shame, embarrassment, denial, fear, social stigma, and low trust in legal institutions—are repeatedly identified as reasons for not reporting. Other reported barriers include lack of hope for help, limited knowledge of reporting procedures, perceptions that the crime is not significant, and general worry. Much of the literature draws on self-selected complaint portals and self-reported datasets (for example, a de-identified set of 3,259 Scamwatch romance-fraud reports after deduplication); these sources have methodological limits (self-selection, optional free-text fields causing missing and uneven narrative data, and unverified or incomplete loss estimates) that constrain generalisability. Some complainants say they report partly to prevent similar harm to others.

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Scope and the ‘dark figure’ of underreporting

Multiple studies and reviews report widespread underreporting of romance and relationship-based fraud and conclude that official statistics and complaint-portal counts substantially understate the number of victims; authors warn these administrative sources capture mainly people who choose to report, producing a large “dark figure” of unrecorded victimisation. [\[1\]](#) [\[2\]](#)

Contributing measurement problems include routine misclassification (for example, romance-baiting recorded as investment fraud), reliance on self-reports that capture only people who acknowledge victimization and choose to report, and frequent noninvolvement of law enforcement (estimated 75%–80% of cases); these factors lead official statistics to substantially underestimate the true scale of romance-related financial harm, and reported financial losses may be inaccurately estimated. [\[2\]](#) [\[8\]](#)

Analyses that combine multiple information sources indicate romance scams generally are trending upward. Victims' shame, self-blame, and fear of social consequences can deter them from reporting scams to law enforcement or disclosing them to their support networks. [\[9\]](#) [\[8\]](#)

Emotional and social barriers to disclosure and reporting

Shame, embarrassment, fear of social disapproval, and anticipated blame are repeatedly identified across qualitative studies, administrative-report analyses, and reviews as major inhibitors of both informal disclosure and formal reporting to authorities or support services; these emotions frequently lead victims to conceal incidents from friends, family, or institutions. [\[1\]](#) [\[10\]](#) [\[11\]](#) [\[3\]](#) [\[4\]](#)

Victim narratives and case analyses indicate related psychological reactions—humiliation, self-blame, denial—that reduce willingness to engage with authorities, supply coherent statements, or seek support; several studies report that these emotional barriers can prolong secrecy and increase the risk of repeat victimisation. [\[12\]](#) [\[1\]](#) [\[4\]](#) [\[13\]](#)

Stigma and fear of reputational damage are further reinforced where offending is framed pejoratively (for example, pig-butcher labels) or where victims worry about being seen as complicit in criminal activity; such concerns are described as reducing reporting and access to justice in multiple doctrinal and empirical contributions. [\[14\]](#) [\[15\]](#) [\[16\]](#)

Practical and institutional constraints shaping reporting

Practical deterrents include victims' perceptions of low prospects for financial recovery and police investigation, and empirical and case reports show that small losses or single-victim incidents are often deprioritised by investigators—factors that reduce victims' willingness to report formally to law enforcement. [\[17\]](#) [\[18\]](#) [\[8\]](#)

Reporting systems are frequently fragmented: qualitative studies and administrative-report analyses document referrals between agencies, difficulties locating the right agency, and reporting categories that lack a dedicated love-scam option; these procedural features produce frustration and unmet expectations about investigation and recovery. [\[19\]](#) [\[20\]](#)

Some jurisdictional and practice reports note that single-entry or centralised reporting mechanisms can reduce victim uncertainty about where to report and remove the burden of jurisdictional navigation, but outcomes and expectations remain variable across contexts and are not universally evaluated in the reviewed corpus. [\[19\]](#)

Authorities' variable responses are documented: a minority of victims experience empathetic, intelligence-led engagement, while many complain of dismissive or unhelpful interactions; proxy-filed reports and high rates of noninvolvement by police are cited as contributors to underestimation of harm in administrative totals. [\[21\]](#) [\[5\]](#) [\[22\]](#)

Help-seeking pathways and third-party triggers

The study analysed 3,259 deidentified Scamwatch reports of dating and romance fraud (reports filed July 2018–July 2019) using thematic analysis of the free-text narratives; each of the 3,259 narratives was individually assessed rather than screened by keyword. The authors note limitations: the sample likely has self-selection bias because it includes only people who knew of and chose to use Scamwatch; unprompted and uneven free-text reporting probably led to underestimation of help-seeking; and the unscreened online self-report data may not reflect the experiences of all romance-fraud victims. Separately, a structured, predominantly closed-ended survey examining reporting, harms, and use of informal and institutional support found that 60.9% (n = 223) of respondents sought no support from other parties. [\[25\]](#) [\[24\]](#) [\[23\]](#)

Third parties—friends, family members, bank staff, remittance agents, clinicians, and volunteer anti-scam communities—sometimes trigger recognition and later reporting; qualitative accounts document cases where friends or bank staff prompted victims to report, though such third-party interventions occur in a minority of documented cases. [\[26\]](#) [\[27\]](#) [\[28\]](#) [\[29\]](#)

Methodological patterns, quality differences, and evidence limitations

The reviewed literature is dominated by self-selected complaint-portal datasets, purposive qualitative interviews, and narrative or scoping reviews; authors repeatedly caution that self-selection, optional free-text fields, unverified reports, and missing data limit generalisability and preclude reliable population-level incidence or aggregate-loss estimation from these sources alone.

[\[7\]](#) [\[2\]](#) [\[30\]](#)

Several studies explicitly describe analytic steps taken to address data quality (duplicate removal, manual coding, case exclusions) and note that final analytic samples often exclude substantial numbers of initial reports because of missing narrative detail; these procedures improve internal transparency but do not resolve representativeness concerns. [\[31\]](#) [\[32\]](#) [\[33\]](#)

Researchers used a deidentified dataset of Scamwatch romance-fraud reports (July 2018–July 2019), but because the reporting system is online and unscreened these self-report data may not reflect the experiences of all romance-fraud victims. Victims often avoid reporting for reasons such as self-blame, perceiving losses as too small, reporting burden, or concern that police will not take the crime seriously. Even when law enforcement informed victims about a scam, some victims later reverted to the same or a new romance scam. [\[13\]](#) [\[24\]](#) [\[34\]](#)

Evidence gaps and future research directions identified in the corpus

Multiple syntheses and primary studies explicitly call for representative measurement of nonreporting victims and for research that directly asks victims about decision timing, motivations, and barriers to reporting and help-seeking; these gaps are repeatedly flagged as essential for designing effective interventions and for understanding prevention potential. [\[33\]](#) [\[30\]](#) [\[2\]](#)

Authors also identify operational and policy priorities supported in the evidence: improving administrative reporting categories to enable specific identification of relationship-based fraud, piloting and evaluating centralised single-entry reporting mechanisms, and studying whether empathetic agency communication increases reporting and access to support. [\[2\]](#) [\[19\]](#)

The literature highlights underresearched populations and phenomena—sextortion within romance fraud, vulnerability among people with cognitive impairment, and pig-butcher hybrids—calling for targeted study; the corpus notes that sextortion and certain victim groups are poorly captured in existing reporting mechanisms, limiting access to evidence and tailored responses. [\[32\]](#) [\[33\]](#) [\[35\]](#) [\[36\]](#) [\[18\]](#)

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